

SHINSAKU NOH AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN CULTURES AND INDIVIDUALS

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Abstract: *The new variety of Noh plays called shinsaku-noh appeared at the beginning of the 20-th century, as what critics called an attempt to revitalize this theatrical ancient art. This paper proposes to analyse the themes of the plays and the occasions on which they were produced, and to draw some conclusions regarding the effects of these representations in the theatrical and cultural life of Japan as well as internationally. We argue that, not only within the Japanese tradition but also on the current cultural and social stage, they have a profound role in mediating between individuals and their roots (“pacifying the spirits of the dead”), alleviating crises and addressing common issues, with a deep cathartic effect.*

With a growing number of shinsaku noh produced abroad by both Japanese and foreign actors, and an increasing number of foreign performers and artists entering the Japanese theatrical world, this genre is becoming an important tool for international artistic exchange. Adding to this the fact that it has come to incorporate political, diplomatic, or social issues of the present times, shinsaku noh seems to become an increasingly powerful artistic medium.

Keywords: *Shinsaku noh, cultural mediator, catharsis, artistic medium, common issues.*

The International Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto (Nichibunken) has announced in March 2013 a research theme called “How to Readjust the Orbit? Checking the 20th century Japanese culture

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and proposing a new vision for the first decade of the 21st century”¹, arguing that for the past 20 years Japan has been confronted with the necessity to readjust the direction and the methods for its development, and has failed to do so. The study is aimed at “readjusting research in Japanese culture, finding what kind of cultural heritage can Japan choose from its experience of the twentieth century so as to transmit it to the future?” “What would be the future of international or intercultural transactions in the field of researches in Japanese culture”, and especially interesting for our paper, “current regime of cooperation between industry, administration and academy must be thoroughly reexamined” and “institutional rigidities should be tested in an international perspective as it threatens to prevent Japan to catching up with the major current of the world.” We will examine these issues in relation to the new Nō theatre (*shinsaku nō*) and demonstrate the way in which it can serve as a viable solution to the problems posed above, how it has become a tool by which Japanese communities address major issues in their lives, and the theatrical representations can be powerful occasions in which administration, academia and the traditional artistic families collaborate fruitfully.

The transmission of culture and knowledge to the next generation seems to be a major problem in Japan too, as well as elsewhere in the globalized world, but the way in which the six hundred year old traditional form of nō has incorporated new elements and recently produced such innovative plays makes us judge and affirm that *shinsaku nō* is a solution for the future.

The nō theatre has been studied from many points of view (mainly historically, it has been “naturalized”, to use Jonathan Culler’s expression², the religious and ritual³ sources of its specific structure have

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² Mărginean Kohno, Ruxandra, *Teatrul Nō: Tradiția creatoare*, Craiova, Scrisul Romanesc, 2009, p. 6.

been thoroughly investigated, but I propose a more sociologically oriented type of approach.

I have summarized as follows the main approaches to *shinsaku nō* to date:

- **Historical** - representing the majority of Japanese scholarship; including "**naturalisation**" (to use Jonathan Culler's expression), i.e. to view a six hundred year old performance with contemporary eyes/concepts.

- **Literary** - study of the structure of plays and performance, identifying the **(a)** religious (**Buddhist**) sources of these structural elements in the **Rokudo** concept ("The Six Realms of Being in the Cycle of Transmigration"); **(b)** Ritual (**shamanistic**) sources of elements in "god" plays; **(c)** narrative sequences in semiotic interpretation.

- **Anthropological interpretation** - Noh as performance, how the acting techniques are transmitted, their relevance for Western theatre.

- **My approach to *shinsaku noh*** - a socially oriented type of interpretation, taking into account: (1) who are the authors of librettos, (2) when are the plays performed and (3) with what purpose are they written and performed. If what I have done so far is more of a qualitative analysis, I intend to continue with quantitative research on the whole corpus of plays.

What are we addressing? To describe the repertoire we could say that we have:

- the classical Nō repertoire: 200 plays in the current program dating from the Muromachi period (of its creation as an art); 3000 plays written

³ Ortolani, Benito, "Shamanism in the Origins of Nō Theatre", *Asian Theatre Journal*, 1984/No. 2, or Poorter Erika de, *Zeami's Talks on Sarugaku: An Annotated Translation of Sarugaku Dangi*, Amsterdam, Hotei Publishing, 2002, or LaFleur, William, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*, University of California Press, 1984.

in the Edo period that are no longer in the repertoire⁴; 300 newly written plays (*shinsaku nō*) beginning with the Meiji Era until the present

- Regarding the new *Nō*: we have 38 plays written in Meiji Era (1868-1912), among which 2 plays on the occasion of the Sino-Japanese war (1895) and 2 related to the Russo-Japanese war (1905); various plays, written on literary topics, world war II, in the Showa Era (1925-1989); a very different range of plays written late in the postwar period, especially the Heisei Era (1989-present) with very diverse topics and purposes, which are the object of my research.

The authorship of the new plays is very significant and interesting to analyse too - I have identified several categories of authors, as follows:

- **scholars of classical literature and specialists of Noh** (Umehara Takeshi, author of *Kawakatsu* in 2009, about Hata no Kōkatsu, adviser of Prince Shotoku in the 6-th century and alleged creator of Noh, a sophisticated play innovating structurally, introducing Hata no Kōkatsu as *shite* and Prince Shotoku as *betsu-jite* and also introducing self-reflection as the secondary character promises to write a play about how Prince Shotoku pacified the vengeful spirit Kōkatsu and turned him into a protector god, thus being one of the most optimistic noh plays ever; Haruo Nishino, Noh scholar, former director of the Hosei Nohgaku Kenkyujo, wrote his second *shinsaku noh* about Jeanne d'Arc, which was staged in 2012 at the 600 years commemoration of the French heroine in Orleans; the leading noh scholar of the postwar period, Yokomichi Mario produced in 1949 (*Taka no izumi*) and then reworked in 1969 (*Takahime*) a Japanese noh style version of Yeats' *Hawk's Well*, a play influenced by noh).

⁴ Watson, Michael, *Electronic databases for antiquarians? Extra-repertory noh play texts in the digital performing arts world*, http://glopac.org/Jparc/Sing_workshop/Watson_abstr.htm, accessed in 20.04.2013

- **Japanese Noh actors:** Udaka Michishige, noh actor and mask carver, who produced *Genshigumo* (“Atomic Cloud”), in Hiroshima in 2010. Izumi Yoshio (actor of the Kanze school)

- **Japanese “amateurs”** like immunologist Tada Tomio whose published works include 5 plays that were produced in Japan and 2 plays not yet staged.

- **foreigners:** Chinese British playwright Janette Cheong writing a Noh in English with a Chinese story - *Pagoda*, successfully touring Asia two years after the British premiere in 2009; Polish diplomat and orientalist, more precisely Noh scholar, wrote in 2011 *The Piano Tuner*, putting on stage Chopin and Delacroix in a debate on art; David Crandall, author, with Mei Uchida, of *The Linden Tree* (published 1986) and *Crazy Jane* (published 1984), both produced in 2011; Elise Forier Edie, playwright, director, actor and teacher, wrote *Icarus* an English language nō, developed over the course of three years at both the Noh Training Project, in Pennsylvania, and at Central Washington University (CWU); Canadian poet Daphne Marlatt wrote *The Gull* (2006), which was the first production of a Noh play in Canada; Arthur Little wrote *St. Francis* (1970), first performed at Earlham College, then performed in Tokyo in 1975; Janine Beichman wrote *Drifting Fires* (1985), first performed at the Tsukuba Expo; Allan Marett wrote *Eliza* (1985) first performed in Sydney in 1989, then in Tokyo in 1990; Greg Giovanni composed *Pine Barrens* (2006) and Erik Ehn *Crazy Horse/Moon of the Scarlet Plums* (2001) produced both in US and later in Japan at the Aichi Expo in 2005⁵.

According to the themes of the plays – which are closely connected to the circumstances which occasioned their writing – I have identified several categories of plays, and, implicitly, of purposes behind these plays:

⁵ various references from internet resources, mainly *The Newsletter of Theatre Nohgaku – In the Noh*, vol. 7, nos. 1-2, at [www.theatrenohgaku.org/newsletter _archive](http://www.theatrenohgaku.org/newsletter_archive), accessed on 02.06.2013.

• **Requiem plays** for distant events like WW II, or for recent and shocking events like the Tohoku Earthquake of 11 March 2011, or commemorating other catastrophes like the ecological disaster at Minamata in 1956. The terms used for describing the purpose/the intended effect of these plays is “pacification of souls”, *chinkon*, or “regeneration”, *saisei*. The bulk of plays devoted to pacifying the souls of those killed in Hiroshima or Nagasaki by the atom bomb is heavy, both numerically and emotionally. Tada Tomio wrote 3 plays on the atomic bombing (*Genbakuki*, *Nagasaki no Seibo* and *Bokonka*) in an attempt to stop the use of the nuclear, while Udaka Michishige who produced *The Atomic Cloud* in 2010 in Hiroshima described his experience of “meeting with the spirits of the casualties of the bombs who, victims of a sudden and unreasonable death, cannot be released from this existential plane and be reborn.” One of the most beautiful requiem plays is *Sei Paulo no kaishin*, “The Conversion of Saint Paul”, produced in 2012 one year after the Tohoku Earthquake.

• **“Ecological” (and requiem) plays**, for pacifying even the souls of animals killed by Minamata disaster, for example (*Shiranui*, “Light in the Water”, produced in 2004 in the very Minamata bay), or, like *Mizu no rin*, “The Circle of Water” a play produced in 2009, casting children, where the theme of the *purification of water*, and the workshops preparing the performance are actually part of the ecological/moral education for children⁶.

• **Other types of commemorative plays**, like *Dōkan* (2001), a play about a medieval warrior produced at the 30-th anniversary of Isehara city (Kanagawa Prefecture) by the municipality⁷, or *Jeanne d’Arc* (2012) performed in France, Orleans and Paris, at the 600-th anniversary of her birth.

⁶ cf. Kikanshi *Gonzui*, no. 79, 6.11.2003, at www.soshisha.org/gonzui/79gou/gonzui_79.htm, accessed on 29.04.2013.

⁷ cf. <http://sansou-nagisa.net/qual/qualnet.cgi?cmd=dp&num=92&Tfile=User&dp= event.html>

• **Religious plays**, inspired by Christianity, hold a small position, but are sometime used politically, as *Iesu no senrei* (“The baptism of Jesus”, 2012), produced at the Vatican, or *Luther*, produced by a Lutheran University in Japan in January 2012, for the 500 years anniversary of the religious Reform⁸.

• Plays inspired by **literary works** – many written in the interwar period (*Chieko sho*, inspired by poet Takamura Kōtarō’s work, or *Eiketsu no asa*, “The Eternal Morning”, inspired by poet Miyazawa Kenji’s work, or recently *Kusamakura* written by H. Nishino based on a famous homonymous Japanese novel by Natsume Soseki. Manga/anime constitute a source of inspiration, like *Garasu no kamen* for the noh *Kurenai Tennnyo* (2006), or the famous anime *Evangelion* transposed as noh dance. The ballet *Giselle* also became a *shinsaku noh*, and finally, in 2000 the best Japanese novel of all times, *Genji Monogatari*, became the source for *Yume no ukihashi*.

• **War, or warrior plays**, forming a large group, are an important part of Noh, which developed as an art for the samurai class. There is a large number of new Noh plays inspired by the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-5, as well as by the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5. In the postwar period, the “war” plays deal with the atomic shock which Japan witnessed.

Having read the media – especially electronic resources – reviews about these *shinsaku nō*, I have noticed several phrases recur in them: if one is *juyō mukei bunkazai* (重要無形文化財), “intangible cultural asset”, the other is *tamashii no chinkon* (魂の鎮魂), “the pacification of souls”. These two phrases come into a strange opposition: the *cultural asset* points to something which is no longer of use for the contemporary person, while pacification of souls points to a very actual and contemporary activity, since everybody needs their peace of mind, especially after major events like the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami.

The reception theory on which one can set the foundation of this

⁸ cf. http://www.kyoto-minpo.net/event/archives/2012/02/17/post_34.php-

research is also important, because the reception of a new *nō* performance today, in the age of global mindsets is very different than the way a performance was evaluated and understood during the middle ages and later, within the framework of artistic patronage specific to Muromachi and Tokugawa periods.

To summarize the goals of my research, which is in its initial stage:



As the directors of Japanese cultural policies recognized, Japan seems to be in a profound crisis. However, we see the *shinsaku nō* being performed in the most diverse places and situations, both at home and abroad, and taking on values that are extremely important to a community and at the same time specific to noh⁹: pacification of souls, commemoration and remembrance of the important events in the life of the community, and a ritual, almost religious function of pacification for the souls of the deceased humans and animals as well. In a world of

⁹ Which has been called by German noh scholar Stanca Scholz Cionca, "a theatre of remembrance".

continuous dissipation and merging of genres Noh is constantly performing an important role. It is taken up by various communities (local, religious) and given value, a specific and almost personal value each time.

And Nō is also becoming the one art (together with *kyogen*) which represents Japan abroad with great success and coherence, as we have seen from the frequent performances in North America and even Europe (France, recently invited Nō into its own history's celebration with “ジャンヌダルク” (*Jeanne d'Arc*), a play written by the reputed specialist and critic Haruo Nishino and performed by Master Kano Tanshū of Kita school).

I think that *nō* is a catalyst for Japanese arts and tradition and it can rally a lot of forces around it in important moments. Why? It has a complexity unlike other art forms (linear, sequential, like music, literature, etc) *it appeals directly to all senses*, is deeply symbolic, and it transmits its message not through words (nobody hardly understands the words chanted in a special way) but directly, through the magic flower (*hana*) that is formed between audience and actors, even if the audiences do not know the traditions lying behind it. We complain about the loss of tradition and the rupture with the past, but we have in *nō* a 600 year old form which manages still to achieve artistic transmission, to relate to young and foreign audiences, and renew itself.

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